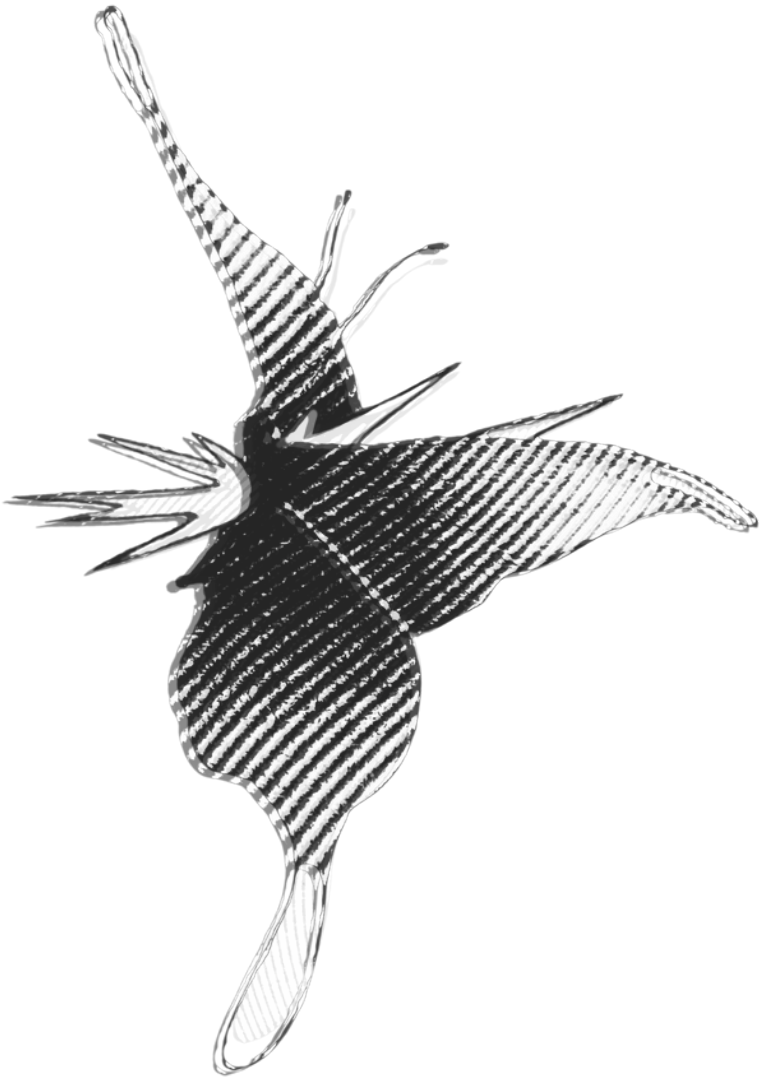

~~don't~~ ignore the gravitational pull

Laia Karmela Nalian

where i come from, they say that the firstborn child takes after their elders. i ponder this often, in the same way i do my lola's portrait - curls carefully arranged, blouse immaculately pressed, ever the poised, beautiful, dutiful eldest daughter. i pondered this the day i stepped foot into her home not two days after she took her last first breath, my chest cramped with wires and that inevitable grief once more. splayed out across the dinner table like a patchwork constellation, the rest of her life unfolded in my eyes; her wedding portrait, commemorating her next chapter of life in america, standing with pride beside the choir she trained in davao in her gown, seated with her siblings in my great-grandparents' home.

i feel like my lola when i think of devotion, like the way she clung to the handle of the last bus leaving the city for the mountainside like a lifeline as a rising sun approached, carrying her baby sister on her back. i think of her when i recall narrating sara crewe's adventures to my sibling to drown out the vitriol our parents spewed downstairs. i think of her weathered hands clasped over mine before my father drove me to the emergency room after i failed to exhale my own last breath.

i feel like my lola when my hand scribbles and glides over paper like the way she recalls longfellow's arrow, its verses imprinted over her heart. i feel like my lola when i break into dance the same way she broke in song at the head of the choir.

i feel like my lola when i love and am *in* love. it comes abundantly and deeply, like the morning fog that embraces mount apo, the eye in a storm of family secrets and memory passed down. i feel this the same way i feel the dull throb in my chest, that sharp, sweet soreness that reverberates between generations, across oceans.

capillaries

i remember- shafts of light graced my room,
a lemon glow that pierced through the gloom.
planets danced between my fingers, but this time,
3 AM time, they expanded into my very soul.
lonely and crowded by color
threatening to spill out, like vomit.
below my heart, where breath is conceived,
i could almost hear my blood run.

you held my gaze
while the eastern bird crooned above
i brought the sun, you said,
despite the gray clouds
i held your gaze
and felt the cyclone quell
when you laid your arm
behind my chair
like the cloud
reaching for the sun
feather-soft

prophecy

lately—
i've run out of ways to fill you
in journal pages, conversations,
letters that spill beyond the margins
line by line, to my very soul.
where my heart frames the reflection of
your adoration,
this is what i've become at your hands.
(can't tear my eyes off)
sun-clawed clouds give way
to a technicolor tempest
that blows my paper monuments down—
you make the alphabet feel like a cage.

the stuff of stars

ahead of summer songbirds follow the morning star
like an antenna to heaven. so too did i beside you-
at the threshold where the sky and the land converged,
i watched you scan the sky for constellations
and understood what sagan meant.
the sun's bruise hung over our heads
and i realized my own had already begun to lighten
when you took our picture after i snuck one of you
the day after i tied my scarf in my curls
like the firmament threading its celestial ribbon across the earth
if only to carry the feeling of you for longer

orasyon

knobby knees shelter a small, soft body / littered with
scrapes and scratches / like the bark of the *balimbing*
tree / on lolo's farm / planted by and for generations
in this holy land / of *abaca* and linoleum

carved out of *narra* / on the foundation of that
age-old song of freedom / *buhaghag buhok, mukhang bisaya*
veins of *santan* thrum to heady, brassy chimes / grime-stained
glass overlooking iron tiles and aged brick. same story,
different view / *kumusta, hello, bonjour*

shout it from the trees, starfruit within reach / whisper
it in the hallways, in the face of a language forced to speak
let it mix with the tears on a bloody shirt / then on bruised knees,
in several years / *lahat na hinahanap mo, babalik sa iyo.*

this is the part

where if i could've i would've mustered the courage
to order a slice of cake to share
and ask you more about the dance your sister practiced,
or your fondest memories of performing *a capella*
you could've ignored my shivers when we sat
by the river james where even the frost started to
settle over your lashes- but you didn't.

warm mist floated over the frigid, scabbed
expanse of my knuckles cradled in your hands
i listened to you talk about the fallout, from spending
covert hours asleep in the school library to having a
more stable roof over your head.
this is the part where my heart unraveled itself from
my tongue to uncover my shame from 2016 while my mouth
simply opened to say: thank you for telling me.

i came back to richmond for one day with my class
and i almost missed our bus, if only to see you open
the passenger side and tell me that i looked pretty under
the setting sun
this is the part where i realized how much
i missed you, and how good you smelled while getting
coffee at nine pm. that was the first time i ever saw you
light a cigarette. we locked eyes for an eternal minute
until the cold breeze swept me back down to earth.

that was the part where i should have told you the truth.

counted down

it took:
twelve hours smothered in (hospital) bed after (hospital) bed,
eleven minutes of Canon in D by Tomita on repeat
ten (tiny) knuckles-
gray and bruised, with lesions that bled;

nine days to (almost) forget
the feeling of grass underfoot,
eight hours of sleep under a threadbare blanket
before the morning routine (under surveillance);
seven pairs of gray slippers strewn over the rec
room like dust bunnies,
six glasses of water to cover the sensation
of 1800 milligrams of lithium
down my throat;

five seconds to handcuff my wrists, their weight
enough to keep me from slipping them off
(if i think hard enough i can still feel the cold metal);
four swigs of milk heated for thirty seconds to mask
three cups' worth of acrid detergent,
its remains

across the right side of a (baby blue) home;

two legs, trembling, as they took the jump;
one minute to self-combust-
(*like a dying supernova that inhaled and exhaled its*
weight in stardust).

i do not know when i ceased to be a satellite in your orbit

lingering in the periphery
until lights out. maybe it was a question
of alignment in each other's sight while adrift,
caught in the gravitational pull.
since then,
distance and time have become as clear
as my bathroom mirror veiled in steam,
where i last felt my damp hair scrunched in your hands
to form curls that expanded over the towel you held.
the days pass by just as hazily;
concrete glistens with snow and slush frozen
over and over as naked branches thrash in the wind
to the growl of car engines in this uncertain, overcast city.
the silver descendant of a Jaguar stopped to caress
my hand the other day. you would've loved her.
some wear chains around their neck,
you wound mine twice around your wrist,
like the caterpillar that spins silk into a chrysalis
before breaking free with newfound wings. that day
i watched it glint under the sun, like the flicker in
your eyes that i told myself was only a trick of the light.
i started wearing gloves again.
vintage red leather that peeks from the sleeves of my coat like a beacon.
the negative space between my fingers feels heavy.
i walk slower these days, look both ways at every corner.
i don't know who i'll find, and i wonder if fear or yearning will get the best of me first.
(i let my tea grow cold now before drinking it.)
sometimes i forget where i am,
find myself inhaling the dust of what lingers between old, delicate pages.
i revisit the shelf where you found my birthday gift, your gaze at pointe-blank range.
my left hand still carries the brush of your fingers
where you landed like a clumsy butterfly
effect that pulled me to Earth far quicker than gravity.

current | presence

like generations of voyagers before me,
i trace a course over the surface of your palm
across fields of creases and callused swells
i tread the negative space between
your fingers where closeness kept me at bay
another pause rings, but this time
i keep on and let my words spiral over
the space we shared, like water
over bedrock that erodes into karst
you brave my weathered topography
your radiance and mine in focus
at the threshold where the land and sea embrace
like the space between shadow and soul
so too did we close the gap

to breathe, is to

drown in lungfuls
of lithium salt and platelets
replenished like clockwork
beneath my chest,
it swells and shrinks against my ribs
it hurts / to breathe is to trust
that with every beat
comes a lull that doesn't always
announce the reset of a time bomb
to breathe is to exercise
the heart's right to struggle against
drowning. i unlock one chamber
with a key from my sleeve,
the other on his ring
and flood my capillaries
with lessons and light and
love that is muscle memory

i followed feathers
to the cascades and breathed in
the air you touched

supplement: a musical accompaniment to ~~don't~~ ignore the gravitational pull

candlelight // *sunset rollercoaster (feat. OHHYUK)*
lake song // *deeper*
dreams // *smerz*
gotta go home // *humans*
undertow // *passion pit*
make way for love // *marlon williams*
a love like yours (don't come knocking everyday) // *martha reeves & the vandellas*
when the war is over // *nourished by time*
daphnis et chloé: lever du jour // *maurice revel*
walang ibang sadya // *joey ayala at ang bagong lumad*
a world alone // *lorde*
joshua tree // *cautious clay*
agnes // *glass animals*
canon in d // *isao tomita*
keep moving // *jungle*
varsity // *smith westerns*